

1. third grade was when i first divided people into categories of “beautiful” and “ugly”. dulce valdes was beautiful. at 9 years old, she’d figured out how to use her beauty in siren-like ways. one flip of her princess locks & boys appeared with sweets and playthings. she was pale, tall, generous, guatemalan, and fish-mouthed. then there was chyna, the colour of inner almonds and as loud as lava cakes. hair permed, always laid. everyone wanted her friendship. this is where i began to understand beauty as currency.

ice cream & sweet mexican bread were always served at dulce’s house on thursday and fridays. although we both lived in the city of trenton, new jersey her house seemed like princeton to me. her pantry seemed endless, much like her hair. crushes & hannah montana were the subjects of debate while we pretended to be gossiping mothers. i loved her a lot & she loved me back.

then clothes began to matter, gender lines went from nearly invisible to unclimbable walls. clothes from justice were in. [all my clothes were thrifted] backpacks from claire’s were in [my backpack was from dollar general] hair that was long & pristine was in. paperbag girls were in. me, the *mole* girl? out.

2. today i was ten minutes late for my shift at goosetown cafe in iowa city. no, that’s a lie. i was seven minutes and 43 seconds late. i am aware of everything. i chose my paisley button down -- the shirt i wear when i want to be perceived as capable but stylish. size eight high waisted jeans & chunky platform boots that make me feel brave enough to stand up to my fears. i am doused in ylang ylang oil. everytime i walk out the door, i owe the world perfection. perfection takes time.

especially when every black scribble on my scalp is sentient, breathing, is as temperamental as a sixteen year old teen. infinite sections have to be detangled, conditioned, oiled, then jelled & covered with satin or static will attack. i wish i could tell my manager, peter, that my baby has thrown a temper tantrum. that my hair is my baby, and i didn’t realize how hard it was raining. that shrinkage has come for me. that i am a single mother, that my child has special needs & i can’t be an efficient worker if i don’t feel beautiful.

flashback to my interview two weeks ago. my hair was in blonde and black box braids & i wore my normal attire -- always something long & flowy paired with leather. when my hair is squared away, i have time to do my makeup, then i have time to be myself. i crushed the interview, responding honestly & laughing the whole time. i am most beautiful when i am silly. i am least lovely when worried. i love fashion; i love my avatar.

3. at nine, i wore boy clothes. this was purely a choice of practicality, as the heeled mary janes and steel-laced socks of sundays were the rue of my existence. church meant pastel ribbons in my hair or quality time with the hot comb. more often than not, my hair stayed in a puff and my fingernails stayed dirty. neutral love for myself was a default. pool class changed that, as my hair volume was too large to sport a bathing cap. to withgo a cap turned 12 inches of hair to two. dulce and chyna's hair obeyed them and withstood the chlorine. i went home with a matted head. i began to understand that i wasn't soft enough, that my hair wasn't straight enough, and the darkness of my skin was *ugly*. comments about my hyperpigmentation came into play, *morenita* was whispered by my dulce's mother, and my grandmother was urged to "do something with that child's head".

angelina jolie in *tomb raider* didn't worry about her hair. in the shampoo commercials, the women smiled. a popular image that sat in my head was one of *ease*: how *easily* these women would emerge out of the ocean. how *easily* blonde, black, and brunette ribbons fell into place. i envied that ease more than anything. i wanted what chyna and dulce had.

4. i decided to ask for a relaxer. maybe i knew it was coming and wanted some agency in the matter. it's funny that perms are called relaxers, because on one hand -- your hair is finally assimilated -- you can relax. however, the process is anything but that. my first relaxer was given to me in my living room, a scary tape was on the television, and the chemicals had me in a daze. i felt like an experiment. i felt like my grandmother was a witch. to watch her mix powders felt magickal and smelled illegal. vaseline was applied to my edges and my hair was sectioned into four pieces. rancid white cream covered my scalp as the hair i spent a decade growing was colonized. tight curls became loose.

fingers under my lap, tight-mouthed, and determined, i sat through the frying of my protein insecurities. although it felt like my scalp was melting i was silent. “are you sure it’s not burning?” my grandma said. “it should really be burning by now. it’s time to wash it out when it burns.” i was ten and i learned beauty was pain. upon removal of the towel, just like a magick trick, a new girl appeared.

5. soon, i would be twelve wearing highlighter as foundation, skin bleaching & code-switching. my aunt would visit from california and the first thing i would notice would be her giant afro. it would be the most beautiful thing to me. she would stay for awhile & eventually encourage me to chop off my colonized tresses. we would spend our free time in her childhood room watching natural hair videos. listening to floetry & erykah badu she’d press confidence into me.

then fifteen, bad weaves, on an applesauce & saltine cracker diet, & in chatrooms drinking slurs. seventeen, i overhear my white latino boyfriend’s father telling him not to bring home a black baby. this same year i find out i am a purple monkey to my white friends. nineteen, too keen, i am an URL beauty queen.

twenty-one, i wear wigs i don’t have time to be natural. i work full-time with liberal white people. most of them are queer. i change my hair like clockwork. one day, stroll into work with mermaid hair. immediately, my white coworkers form a circle of curiosity around me. *this must be expensive*. they say. it’s a 15 dollar shake and go. to under my wig cap i have little green braids. i am a secret medusa. i sell soap & research gilmore girls in the bathroom to chime into conversations. twenty two i am hairless i am the most beautiful thing. twenty three, the hair grows back after all of the experiments. i work at a pasta place in the town of my hippie college. the owner is a white lesbian. the dishwasher is a white man named chad with a standing rock tattoo with a black girl fetish. i get fired.

twenty three wash day takes an actual day. i live in a new city. i get a new job at goosetown cafe. it is my first time working with numerous people of colour in years. twenty three, i see my coworker rachel with the same messy puff i wore as a child.

6. rachel is excellent. rachel is ageless. rachel is stern; i decide she is perfect to emulate. she laughs loudly with regulars. so i laugh too, even though i don't understand the humour. even when i get mistaken for her; i laugh. even though i am 4 shades darker, 1 foot shorter, and have the chest of a boy. i keep laughing. something about being black and being a woman makes me doubly prone to these sorts of things. i am automatically seen as aggressive & the adoption of hyper-softness doesn't serve me. i don't know what to share of myself to anyone. i don't want to be prone. i want to work and go home and repeat.

i get fired again. i have papers to write still. i want to write about the relationship that almost cost my life; but i get stuck. peter tells me that i am not outgoing enough. that they are looking for someone more boisterous; more energetic. i feel too sensitive for the world; i am sick of drinking slurs; of my hermit crab ways. i've swapped shells so many times by now. to go shell-less? i couldn't.

7. i still have papers to write. i sit in high ground cafe, right across from goosetown. window seats have been secured for carson & i. we both have work to do. i've gotten a mega extension on my portfolio and he is finishing up his latin seminar. i am thinking about henry. henry, who i've written 20 pages about in the last month. henry, who protested all last summer. henry, blonde. tahjia, brown. henry, prince. tahjia, pauper.

henry who colonized my body; who is praised as an activist. whose instagram bio reads *black trans lives matter*. henry who almost killed me. henry who is an activist for the aesthetic. these thoughts cloud my mind. i don't know how to tell the story of us. so i won't.

what i will say is that the blood of conquistadors runs through his bones. what i can say is that when i saw that twigs sued shia la bouef for sexual battery, physical abuse, and emotional violence i didn't use the internet for two weeks. he treated twigs as if she existed for him. there's a metaphor to be made about the imperialism of it all. how christopher columbus said, *how exotic; this will be mine. this will be my prize*. how africa is the motherland, truly. how twigs played shia's stand in mother figure in *honeyboy*. how i was small, just like henry's mother.

8. with iced coffee in my system, i thought faster than i could type. the sentiment that i've been speaking of became clear to me. the world treats black women like we are disposable. black

women are fuckable; then unfuckable & always unprotected. a missing poster stares at me.  
breasia terrell. no more than 11 years old. last seen in davenport, iowa. a mood of grey creeps  
back in. she is not missing. she is not alive. i think about crumpling the poster but she's too  
beautiful.